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ABSTRACT

In order to describe the process by which teachers who are learning to use writing conferences move toward a more constructivist view of teaching and learning (emphasizing interaction between teacher and student, the negotiation of meaning, and the role of language in learning), a study presents three case studies. Subjects were three New York City elementary school teachers participating in the Columbia University Teachers College Writing Project (a coordinated effort to involve teachers and students in the writing process in the classroom setting). The study describes each teacher in turn: (1) characterizing their writing conferences, including strategies for conferring; (2) demonstrating how teachers' conceptions of the purposes of the conference shaped their interactions with students; and (3) demonstrating how these conceptions changed over time. Three semi-structured interviews and three classroom observations made over one school year were used to gather data about each teacher. Results indicated that although the three teachers started at different points with differing conceptions of the purposes of the writing conferences, they progressed toward a common point reflecting a balance between encouraging students to own their writing and finding a way to intervene to encourage growth in the writing of students. Movement towards this balance was reflected on three dimensions: conceptions of the purposes of conferences; the content of conferences; and teacher-student interactions during the conference. (Sixteen references are attached.) (SR)

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# The Teacher, the Author, and the Text: Variations in the Form and Content of Writing Conferences*

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A constructivist theory of teaching and learning emphasizes interaction between teacher and student, the negotiation of meaning among members of a culture, and the role of language in learning (Bruner, 1966; Cobb, Yackel & Wood, 1988; Vygotsky, 1986). The writing conference in which the teacher interacts with students for the purposes of clarification and revision is an example of a process in which there is opportunity for the teacher and the student to negotiate the meaning of a text through dialogue.

Information about conferences mainly consists of descriptions for successful conferences (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1979), while most of the research on conferring has been limited to high school or college students (See for example Freedman & Sperling, 1985; Jacob, 1982). This research suggests that conferences have not been driven by student interests or concerns, but were unilateral interactions from teacher to student that resembled lessons more than conversations (Jacob). The research that has been done in an upper elementary classroom by Michaels and her colleagues (1986) indicates that response by the teacher and revision by the student have been geared to finding a match between the student's text and the teacher's implicit schema for an adequate representation of text. Contextual limitations of the school environment such as the formalization of expert/novice talk, lack of time and intimacy, as well as the press to achieve skill-level goals have been regarded as impediments to achieving a more authentic constructivist interaction between teacher and student about writing (Barnes, 1976; Florio-Ruane, in press).

The purpose of this paper is to describe the process by which teachers who are learning to confer move towards a more constructivist view of teaching and learning that is reflected in their interactions with students. In describing how teachers who are beginning to use writing process move towards this view, the paper also 1) characterizes the writing conferences of the participating teachers including their strategies for conferring; 2) demonstrates how teachers' conceptions of the purposes of the conference shaped their interactions with students; and 3) demonstrates how these conceptions changed over time.

## Program Description

The Teachers College Writing Project is a coordinated effort between the New York City Board of Education's Division of Curriculum and Instruction and Teachers College at Columbia University to involve teachers and students in the writing process within the regular classroom setting (Calkins, 1986; Calkins & Harwayne, 1987, NCRTE, 1987). The Writing Project has two major components: 1) teacher trainers (including two co-directors, seven teacher-trainers, and three professional writers) who interact with teachers and children about the writing process in the public school classrooms and 2) workshops run by project staff at Teachers College that take place during the summer and on Saturdays for New York City teachers (NCRTE, 1987). During the workshops and the Summer Institute, teachers engage in writing themselves and respond to the writing of peers; watch videotapes of trainers working with students; and engage in such activities as role-playing and discussing with one another ways to teach writing in their classrooms

(Calkins & Harwayne). These features of the Writing Project incorporate many aspects of effective staff development programs including demonstrations, modeling, and feedback ( Showers, Joyce & Bennett, 1987). In addition, the Writing Project takes place within supportive school environments to take into consideration many of the contextual limitations previously identified in research.

Writing Instruction

In the Teachers College Writing Project, writing is assumed to be purposeful; students should be involved in their own writing and they should be involved in the process of what "real authors" do (Calkins, 1986). Just as authors write to record ideas, plan, organize, and make sense of their lives, children should be able to choose their own topics to make sense of their lives (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987). Writing is a process that consists of drafting ideas, responding, revising and rethinking, sharing those drafts with others, and finally editing for publication. Essential aspects of the program include: 1) involvement of very young children in writing; 2) the use of invented spelling as part of the acquisition of conventional spelling; 3) the use of literature for exposure to different genres of writing; and 4) anecdotes about the personal lives of authors (Calkins, 1986).

The role of the teacher is to "help students care about their writing" (Calkins & Harwayne, p. 23). Teachers should establish a "literate environment" in which they can respond to the writing of children by providing materials and a simple, predictable schedule. The predictable structure which Calkins promotes in the staff development program consists of a mini-lesson in which the teacher presents an idea about the process of writing or exposes students to

a published author's piece, regular writing time in which students write and the teacher circulates among students conferring with individuals about their writing, and share time in which several students read their work-in-progress and other students respond to it (Calkins, 1986). This visible structure is a vehicle for altering traditional classroom norms by getting teachers to interact on a daily basis with students about writing.

Purposes of Writing Conferences

Central to the writing process is responding to individual students about their writing through establishing individual conferences. Calkins describes the main purpose of the writing conference as getting students to become critical readers of their own texts; students should become more reflective and more in control of their own writing processes. The teacher's role is to listen to what the student is saying and to respond in a personal and genuine manner (Calkins, 1986). Since the conferences are conceived of as conversations between teacher and child, the content of the conference can include the topic of the writing and strategies the student uses, as well as the writer's goals and opinion of the work (Calkins & Harwayne, 1987). Calkins (1986) cautions against teachers controlling student work by evaluating the writing or asking specific questions that might not be of interest to the writer. The role of the teacher is described as a kind of facilitator-- the teacher is to interact with the student about his/her writing. The concrete manifestation of that role is unspecified because it is not possible to prescribe conferences; the task is to ask real questions and to encourage the child to express himself/herself.

Since the purposes of the conferences are quite open and the role of the teacher unspecified, teachers may conceive of the purposes very differently from one another. The implicit purposes of the conferences and conceptualizations of their roles during the conferences shape the interactions between teacher and student. The conferences reflect teachers' views of issues of ownership of the writing and the nature and extent of their intervention in students' writing.

## Research Method

### Sample

This paper describes three teachers* to be investigated as case studies; they were selected from the teachers participating across elementary grade levels from several schools within the New York City School District. The teachers were experienced elementary teachers who were all new to the Writing Project. The teachers had taken part in an extensive staff development program which included monthly all-day workshops, 5-7 classroom demonstrations by experts trained in the writing process, and on-going advice and feedback from trainers throughout one school year. Each school had a leader who was committed to the writing process and provided materials, support, and opportunities for the teachers to participate in the program. Teachers received instruction in conferring in addition to other aspects of the writing process such as 'mini-lesson', the writing process, and sharing time as well as having exposure to the philosophy of the program.

* All names are pseudonyms.

Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect data about teachers: a semi-structured interview and classroom observation; these instruments were developed by the National Center for Research on Teacher Education as part of its research agenda to investigate eleven teacher education programs. Each teacher was interviewed three times for 2 hours over the course of a school year (Oct., Dec.,1987; June, 1988). Interview questions included aspects of teachers' knowledge and beliefs about writing. Teachers responded to specific scenarios designed to elicit teachers' beliefs about teacher-student interactions during writing. Interview questions also included issues about the impact of the staff development project on teachers' writing instruction and their roles as teachers. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Three classroom observations of about one hour in duration were conducted of the writing time during October, December and June; these were audiotaped and transcribed by the observer. Since the unit of analysis is the conference, the pattern of conferring within the observation was the focal point. Teachers had between five to ten conferences with individual students during the writing time. Student samples of writing were also collected in order for researchers to gain greater understanding of the context of the writing conference including the text to which teachers were responding and changes students made.

Analysis

Analysis consisted of examining the conferring sections of the classroom observations and the interview sections which contained

references to the conferring process. The procedure for coding teacher interviews took the form of extracting 1) statements about the teacher's role during conferring and 2) statements about the student's role during conferring. A framework for establishing teachers' purposes for the conferences as well as their implicit conceptions of control guided the analysis of the interviews.

Coding of observations focused on three features across all conferences of each teacher from the three data points. These three features are: 1) turn-taking between teacher and student within a conference; 2) content discussed within each conference; and 3) statements or questions made by both teacher and student.

Patterns of turn-taking included length of turn of both the teacher and student and numbers of turns taken. The conference was analyzed according to the kinds of content discussed within the conference. Issues of topic selection, organization, story structure, use of description, mechanics, and logistics of the management of writing were coded. These features were chosen because they characterize dialogue patterns and text analysis previously identified by research.

Questions and comments were categorized in terms of processes teachers used such as probing, supporting, summarizing or mirroring, and prescribing. Probing questions included "right-answer" oriented questions, clarifying questions, and open-ended questions. Supporting statements included the teacher praising the student or the student's writing. Summarizing or mirroring strategies included statements that rephrased what the student had said. Prescribing statements were defined as those statements in

which the teacher directed the student to do something in particular or made recommendations for changes.

After each conference was coded individually, the author looked for ways to characterize each teacher's set of conferences. Patterns from each set of conferences from each of the three data collection points-- October, December, and June emerged. Key insights from these patterns that express the ways in which teachers differed from one another are included in the results.

## Results

The three teachers learned to balance student ownership of writing with teacher intervention. Although teachers started at different points with differing conceptions of the purposes of the writing conferences, they progressed towards a common point that reflects a more balanced position. The balance is reflected in the teachers' self-reports about their conceptions, the content of the conferences, and the interactions of the teachers and students during the conference. For the three teachers, the content became more substantive-- there was less emphasis on mechanics or logistics of getting started and more attention to the ideas expressed in the pieces of writing. Student involvement and student talk increased as the teachers shifted their roles within the conference. The three cases included below provide contrasts in how teachers approached conferring and how their skills developed and changed.

### Teacher as Editor

The case of of Alison illustrates how a teacher whose initial orientation toward writing and conferring with students reflects a technical view of writing can change and develop through continual

interaction with students about writing. In the fall of 1987 when Alison began the Writing Project, she held a view that can be captured by the simile of teacher as editor because of her emphasis upon the mechanics of writing such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. She moved towards an orientation in which students were taking more control of their writing, while she was becoming more sensitive to individual differences among students. She moved from having a focus on the text of the writer and the technical aspects within that text to having more of a focus on the child and the children's response to their own pieces.

In response to the scenarios about writing that were presented as part of the interview protocol in October, Alison expressed her technical orientation by suggesting she would point out grammatical errors that occurred in students' writing. She also focused on format of writing including the student not indenting paragraphs. She thought topic sentences were an important issue that could be taught through the use of dittos. She believed it was important for students to understand and use the correct forms of the English language.

The lesson Alison taught to the whole group reflected this technical orientation. She focused on having students write a story about pictures she had selected. Her intention was for students to categorize objects, sequence events, and use adjectives to make their stories more interesting. While students wrote their pieces, Alison sat at her desk and helped students who approached her. Students were expected to recognize and respond to their own needs, while entering her space on her terms to produce a correct piece of work.

Her conferences with students focused on the mechanics of writing such as punctuation, and telling students they had included too many 'ands' and 'thens.' To one student she responded to a particular part of the text and said, "I like that part" and then asked the girl if she would like to change anything. An example of dialogue between the teacher and student expresses her role of teacher as editor in the fall conferences:

Conference with B2

Teacher is seated at desk. B2 is talking with the teacher while two other students wait in line.
T: Do you want to show me your writing?
B2 reads his story about his birthday.
T: That's a lovely story, but I noticed you were having trouble doing something. What do you think the trouble was? (She makes a breathing sound.) What am I doing?
B2: Breathing.
T: You had to use one big breath. How come?
B2: I always do that when I read.
T: Look at your paper, tell me if there is something missing. Just by looking not by reading. What are you missing?
B2: Periods.
T: What is that causing you to do?
B2: Mess up.
T: You had to read it all in one breath. It is almost like a stop sign.

The teacher then begins reading the story pausing for periods. She then assists student in placing periods in the story.

It is clear in this conference as with the others in the fall observation that the teacher is in control. The student has little input and there is little discussion about the content of the piece. She tries to get the student to put in periods by indicating that the reader must breathe. She knows the answer and is trying to get the student to match her idea of what is wrong with the story. In acting in the capacity as editor, Alison is not directive. She does not point

out his errors, but hopes the student will guess what the problem is and correct it. Neither does she follow his lead and allow him to talk about the piece.

By December of 1987, Alison has set up a Writing Process structure in the classroom with mini-lessons, share sessions, and a time for writing and conferring where she circulates around the room. Her attitude about the students' writing has changed to reflect more of the Writing Project philosophy. Alison claims in the interview:

> You do not want to change what the child is trying to say, which many times can be a problem. . .you can step in and just change that piece of writing or suggest all of these suggestions. They go ahead and change it and that is not what they wanted to say in the first place.

When discussing a particular student's piece of writing she says:

> I don't want to change his idea or his thoughts about the story. That's one thing Writing Project wants to respect, the fact that we want to know what the child wants to write or what the author wants to write.

She sees her role in the conference as a supportive one for students to know their writing is appreciated:

> I'm saying they need me in conferencing. . .I'm supporting them and letting them know that their writing is appreciated.

Instead of focusing primarily on the mechanics of writing, Alison now suggests in the interview that students are learning about character development and different techniques and genres of writing. She says she focuses on students' enjoyment of writing and is getting to know students' personal histories through their writing. However, her interactions with students still focus on the technical aspects of writing, indicating that she has not yet internalized the Writing Project philosophy.

Her conferences with students indicate a contradiction between what she says is important and what she does. She does not let go of the control of the conference. Her interaction in the conferences seems to take a direct instruction approach with each individual. She asks quite specific questions of one boy to which he responds in monosyllables. In another conference she praises the student who is looking up words in the dictionary and suggests the girl put in punctuation. In several other instances, she points out what the student has done or evaluates the piece in general terms such as "That is lovely" and tells another student he is "on the right track." One of the most distinctive features of these conferences is that the teacher reads the child's piece aloud to the child; the teacher is clearly in control and the child is not allowed to have his voice heard. The following conference indicates Alison's struggle with incorporating the Writing Project philosophy.

Conference with G2

Teacher approaches G2 who is seated at Table 3.

T: Anything you want to ask me?
G2: . . .information. . .
T: Say it again.
G2: . . . Read it because I need information. . .
T: You need information. (Teacher reads) "My classmates are very nice people."
G2: (inaudible)
T: (T reads from student's text) "They help me when we need help they spend a lot of time so we can understand. Like Mary * she helps me when I need help. When it is reading time we go in the back and read the story together. Even Raymond, he reads. Even Rich likes to help. Most of the time he helped reading because he loves reading. Now that Christmas is coming and we have a play we are working on together." So your classmates are very very helpful I can see from this story.
G2: (inaudible)
T: Where do you feel you are having trouble? What part? Can you tell me what you feel?

Teacher excuses herself for an interruption and then returns to G2.

Up to this point, the teacher asks the student what she needs. Even though the teacher is in control of the piece by reading it, Alison is asking for the students' input. The teacher tries to understand what the child is saying and summarizes it. However, she never really responds to the student's need as can be seen in the next part:

T: As you were saying. You feel you were having
G2: I'm not sure.
T: Trouble? I think you are coming along nicely. I think you are really telling me why your classmates are nice. You start off saying your classmates are very nice people. And you talk about how they help you and who helps. And now you are getting into another section about the Christmas play and how you were working together. So perhaps you can put down some of the words (about) your helping each other in the class. I see how they help in subjects such as reading and now your class is involved in another type of subject, or project actually. Why don't you tell us how we are working together. Perhaps we can read it over and see where we can go from there. I think you are doing a fine job. Can you tell me some ways that you are working together?
G2:

In this dialogue, the student asks for help in including more information, but the teacher never really addresses that need.

Although the student indicates she is having trouble, the teacher, in an attempt to encourage the child, disregards the child's feelings about having trouble, and tells her she is doing fine. Alison points out what the student has done in the text, she supports her by complimenting the piece, and she asks the student to provide information about what is needed in the play. Alison seems to have an implicit idea of what she wants the writing to be. In the next part, Alison is asking the child to answer the teacher's questions about the classmates; it is not clear that the child is interested in the new direction in which the piece of writing is headed:

T: In the class. It doesn't have to be for Christmas. That's a whole new thing. It could almost be a whole new story. If you find that you want to get involved in the Christmas play and what you need how you are working together, tell me.
G2: Like you know. . . children stories parts of the play and songs over and like help each other with singing and getting the words
T: Practicing parts.
G2: To get it and
(pause)
T: Anything else?
(pause)
T: Keep thinking.
G2: And then we need help we just
T: What kind of projects are they making? The classmates.
G2: What are you making for the play?
G2:
T: Are they working on any kind of scenery or anything like that?
G2:
T: Tell me . Tell me.
G2: They are like painting like the . . . would look nice.
T: Who is working on that?
G2: The teachers. Students.
T: Good. As you are telling me all this about the Christmas play, I think you can write it down and then you can read it over. This sounds like a bit of an introduction about how your class helps each other and this information that you just told me really shows how your class works together and is communicating and practicing with one another and being patient with one another. I think you have a lot to put down and I think you are going to end up with a very lovely piece of writing. It's a great story and it's happening right now. Right now in your class so I think there is a lot you can put down. Why don't you try working on that. Is that good enough for you ? Does that help you ?

G2: . . a lot of information. . .
T: A lot of information you think you have? Fine. OK. Good luck to you.

In the course of her interaction with this child, Alison has initially been open to what the child has written, and then, when the child did not clearly articulate her needs, Alison has taken over the piece by asking questions that she wants answered. She almost demands the child to respond to her agenda. The child says very little in contrast to Alison's extended monologue.

However, this interaction is substantially different from her interactions with students in the fall. Alison has a dialogue with G2 and allows her to speak about her piece in the beginning. In the beginning of the dialogue, Alison provides an opportunity for the child to give her information; it is when there is uncertainty that Alison takes over. Alison's interaction with this child is substantially different from the conference in the fall in terms of what is discussed. This conference and others in December, unlike the fall conferences, are content oriented. The teacher shows an interest in the child's ideas rather than producing a correct version of a text.

By June the students do seem to have more control over their writing than in October and December. The children read their own pieces to the teacher and she makes a point of asking several students how they feel about their writing. The teacher is having more extended dialogues with students than earlier in the year and is responding to content. Her questions seem to be real questions where she is trying to understand and clarify the piece. The

following conference reflects a shift in content and a shift in control of the piece:

Conference with B4

T approaches B4 who is sitting at table 3. She brings up a chair and sits next to him.

B4: Like on a movie. Part 1 and then Part 2.
T: Oh I see like a series. Good. Is that what you are working on?
B4: Do you want me to read it?
T: Go ahead. What is the title? (Pause) Go ahead and read it.

B4 reads his story about a boy who went with a monster who gave him candy.

T: Oh eating candy?
B4: Uh huh. When he ate the candy he was down there with the devil.
T: Oh, OK.

B4 continues to read about the devil.

T: Very nice. How do you feel about the story?
B4: Uh. How do I feel?
T: Yeah, how do you feel about it?
B4: All right.
T: All right?
B4: Yeah.
T: So did he actually have the dream?
B4: The dream. . . turned into the devil.
T: So the dream ended up being true.
B4: See they killed the devil.

The teacher wants the student to think about his own feelings about the story. It seems that the child is not accustomed to responding to his own feelings about the story, but the teacher accepts his response and seems honestly interested in whether the character had the dream. The child has the opportunity to explain his story to her. The next part of the dialogue reveals how she tries to get the student to think about audience. She responds in a way that reflects her own lack of clarity as a reader about the piece.

T: One thing I noticed about your book is that you have your (inaudible) at the end. At first, I thought the story was over. You woke up and it was a dream. I thought it ended there but then your story went on and I was very curious to find out that he was the devil. My question was, though, you want the reader to do that, don't you?
B4:
T: Do you want the reader to say that actually was true? That's what you actually do?
B4:

After responding as a reader in trying to understand his piece, Alison shifts back into a more traditional role of the teacher and asks about telling details which had been the topic of the mini-lesson.

T: Is this supposed to be illustrated? I see some pages aren't illustrated. Do you think you have any telling details in this story?
B4: Huh?
T: Do you have any telling details in this story?
B4: Yeah.
T: Let's see if we can find one.
B4: They walked. . .
T: Anything?
B4: Yeah like his mother told him not to go with any strangers. He did anyway and like in the dream he just saw. . .
T: I see. Good. OK, you want to keep working on it. Let me know when you are finished and then we will go over it again.

Alison shifts from acting as a reader and respondent to a role in which she is asking the student to fit into her agenda. She asks for illustrations and telling details and seems to be disengaging from this student. The conference also suggests just how difficult it is to shift roles completely in interactions with students. Alison is somewhat inconsistent in her interactions with this boy, moving from being an interested reader and respondent to trying to ensure that he has included some of the content from the mini-lesson.

This conference reflects a difference from previous interactions both in orientation toward the purposes of the conference and towards the student. There is much more dialogue than in previous conferences since the child is explaining his story and not just answering the teacher's questions. Alison's June conferences do reflect an interest in hearing what the child is saying and a real shift from the fall conferences that were focused on only mechanics.

This shift towards being genuinely interested in the child is expressed in the interviews as well. In the June interview, Alison says, "The important thing is what the student wants to say" indicating she is concerned with being receptive to students' ideas. She discusses the progress of students and how they seem to have become more aware of themselves as writers and that they have an audience for their pieces.

In summary, throughout the course of the year, Alison's role shifted from that of teacher as editor to teacher as supporter within the writing conferences. This shift is reflected in her conceptions of the purposes of the conference, as well as in the content and type of interaction with students. Alison's conception of the purposes of the conference moved from that of editing student work to that of supporting student work. The content of the conferences changed from having a primary focus on mechanics to a focus on student ideas. Her interactions with students moved from being highly controlling with little student input to increased student input in which she tries to understand what students are expressing. Although Alison began with a technical orientation to writing and strongly intervened in trying to get students to match her scheme for

the text, she progressed towards a more balanced position in which she accepted students' responses and tried to provide direction to individuals.

Teacher as Therapist

Paula. In contrast to Alison, Paula provides an example of a teacher who begins at the other end of the continuum and moves towards intervention in the writing of students. She believes children should write about what is important to them and that students should enjoy writing, have choices, take risks, and have control over their writing. Paula values the Writing Workshop in promoting children to take ownership over their writing. She says:

> I think it's a matter of ownership in the writing workshop. The kids have total control over what they're writing, total control over hanging it, total control over topic.

Her emphasis upon control reflects Paula's conception of the primary function of the conference as that of fulfilling emotional needs of her students. Paula finds that she has to satisfy students' emotional needs in order for them to learn:

> I have so many. . . kids that have overwhelming emotional needs. . . I realize that most of them are not going to learn this year if those needs aren't in some way either curtailed momentarily or satisfied in some way by myself or their peers.

The writing conference is an opportunity for the teacher to provide individual attention to the student in relationship to writing.

Providing individualized attention to students in the form of the writing conference is the way in which Paula can attend to the emotional needs of her students. In discussing conferring, she says:

> [In the conference] tremendous needs are being met, they are being listened to. . . They are finding out that they have ideas of importance that no one else has, that their ideas of importance are unique. They're finding out that I see them as unique and that I care about their ideas, and care about what they are doing, I think that tremendous emotional needs can be met through that.

The issue of control is imbedded within her role of supporting emotional needs of students. Her conception of the primary purpose of the writing conference as a way to support emotional needs of children moves towards a greater awareness of the text that students produce. Her interactions with students change as she tries to understand how students can gain control of their writing.

In the conferences with students observed in October, Paula concentrates on supporting students' ideas, getting students to form words from their pictures, and to sound out words. Her probing mainly is concerned with asking students what they will write about. One of the ways in which she seems to provide support for their ideas and to support emotional needs is to stand very close to the student. Often she is touching the student or in one case, she was rubbing a student's back during the conference. Her primary strategies are to support the students and to encourage them to write anything they are willing to write on paper. The following

conference from October indicates the ways in which she supports their ideas and takes a non-directive approach towards interacting with them:

Conference with B4

Teacher approaches B4 at the table.

T: Do you want to show me what you are writing today?
B4: I'm not writing nothing.
T: What are you getting ready to write about?
B4: (Inaudible)
T: You are going to write about a ship?
B4: No about people.
T: Those are nice colors you are using. I like those colors. What are you drawing, is that part of the story?
B4: (Inaudible)
T: How could you do that?
B4: (Inaudible)
T: I see that. That's a wonderful drawing. Is that part of your story? Will you come over to me when you are ready to share it?

When the child seems resistant to writing, Paula asks about his readiness to write. She does not want to push him into writing when he is unwilling. She compliments his efforts in order to get him to write something. She asks about the colors he has used and the relationship to the text. Her primary goal seems to be to give the child individual attention and to say something about writing. In another conference from October, Paula tries to support the child by just engaging the student in conversation. Her goal is to talk with the child and to get to know the student:

Conference with B5

Teacher walks over to B5.

T: It is an interesting drawing. A lot of nice flowers. Is he watering them?
B5: Yeah. It's Pinocchio.
T: This is Pinocchio? Did you know that was an Italian name?
B5:
T: You were born in London, weren't you?
B5: . . .my mother was English. . .when I was a baby. . .

It is in the December conferences that the issue of control becomes apparent. In the following conference, Paula demonstrates her own conflict over how much students should be in charge of their own writing.

Conference with G1

The teacher approaches a round table where four girls are sitting together with their writing. [Students are identified by number and gender.]

T: Got your writing, G1? That 's the piece you are writing about, now what's that about?
G1: I was going to my aunt's house. . .My Mommy really did not come. . .
T: It's about sleeping over, right? Let's see what else you have added since I last saw this.
G1: . .It's a rainbow. . .
T: This is what the sky looked like when you got to your grandma's. It was a nice day then, huh?
G1: . . .when I have finished my picture. . . I have finished it all in two days.
T: That's not bad, is it? Are you going to put some words in there?
G1: A picture of my dad. . . this is my dad, he is funny. . . this is my grandpa. . .he is funny.
T: Let's see if I have the sequence of events. Just a minute.

The teacher is trying to understand the sequence of events while at the same time move the student towards writing words on the page. Paula seems genuinely engaged in the text while getting the student to provide more information. Paula is both trying to attend to the needs of the student and to get the student to focus on the text; the next section of the dialogue shows this dual role:

Teacher is interrupted and turns back to G1.

T: Now this is going to your grandma's house, right?
G1: This is going to my auntie's house.
T: And this is you when you get to your auntie's house? And it is a beautiful day. I can tell by the way the sky looks. This is the house.
G1: . . .house. . .standing up. . .people were coming to the auntie's house and there was a meeting.. .
T: I see. They were coming to a meeting at your auntie's house and you were there too? You were there when there was a lot of people.
G1: And I didn't even see my mom.
T: You were in your house and you didn't even see her. There must have been a lot of people there. Then after they left, you saw the people. So this is a picture of her on that day of the meeting.
G1: My aunt and my grandma.
T: And that is the two of them together, right? Where is your grandma in this picture?
G1: She was. . .and she was in Washington.
T: Washington D.C., huh?
G!: Washington D.C. and I live in New York.
T: What?
G1: And I live in New York.
T: Yeah, I know you do. So this is about a lot of different people.
G1: Yeah.
T: What would be a good title for the book?
G1: I don't know.
T: Now that you have all the pictures done, what are you going to do?
G1: I'm writing words.
T: Super.

In this portion of the dialogue, the teacher summarizes what the child says and tries to make sense of the story. Her questions of the child are content oriented. It is clear that Paula hopes that the child will write words on the page and she praises the student for expressing those intentions. About 20 minutes later, G1 approaches the teacher and this conversation took place:

G1: Watch. (She reads) Nan read to Dan.
T: Now those are nice words you wrote there about Nan reading to Dan. But it isn't what a story is about, G1. You told me it was about your aunt and
G1: (inaudible)
T: Come on, G1. I'm not going to fall for that. These are words.

G1: He read to my uncle. . . I made a different part.
T: When you told me about the story you told me such neat things about this meeting that was going on and all the people that were there and now you wrote something silly.
G1: But I didn't have enough room to write. . .
T: What could you have do if you did not have enough room?
G1: Write it all over again.
T: (demonstrates with paper) You could add a piece of paper there. Let me show you. Look. You could staple it there. You could write all those wonderful things you told me about that weird meeting where you couldn't even see your aunt. OK? All right.

Paula uses a variety of different strategies such as supporting what the student is saying, asking for more information through probing, and summarizing what the teacher believes the child is saying in the first part of the conference. The teacher is trying to understand her story as well as suggest she do such things as put in a title. The child seems to be asserting some control by telling her story about the meeting and the people who were involved and adds some of her own details. However, all of this shifts when the child brings back a 'story' that does not resemble the story she told the teacher earlier and, instead, has words copied from a chart "Nan read to Dan." Now whose story is the "Nan read to Dan" piece? Whose story is the telling of the events at the meeting? In some senses the teacher has taken control of what the chid has written and called it "silly" because it no longer matches the teacher's conception of what a story is and what a child should write during writing time.

Paula's own reflection about the incident includes the following:

> There was also a breakthrough with G1. Although the conference was a little contrived, she has been drawing about visiting her auntie and adds more to the story each time, but hadn't written any words.

> Today she writes under one of the pictures, " Nan can read to Dan." This is your classic pre-primer words that she knows and tried to rationalize by saying it was her uncle and auntie. I called her on it. Ordinarily, I might let a child have that power, but because she had so much story, I didn't want her to get away with it. I think her response was positive, she could laugh about it and realized she had more to say than the silly words she put down. She is able to put more words down as much as any other beginning reader. Whether she will think it is important or take the time, I don't know. I will have to go back and talk out the story to reinforce that this is an important story.

Paula seems to believe she is allowing the child to say what she really wants to say by not letting the child " get away with" writing pre-primer words that do not relate to the story the child wants to tell. Paula explains:

> It isn't what she wants to write. The focus then is on the spelling, on an isolated academic result rather than the process, rather than her truly expressing and finding her voice as a writer. The things she is writing about are not the things she wants to conference about.

Conflicts occur on many levels. The child may be showing conflict between expressing her ideas and not having the tools to transform her ideas into standard English. Yet the child has written some words; she is trying to take some control of her own work by writing what she knows how to write and in what she feels safe writing. A conflict occurs between what the child writes and what

the teacher assumes the child wants to say. The event raises a dilemma for the teacher and raises an issue of how students can be in charge of their own writing when they do not have the tools in the form of standard written English mastered.

This event highlights Paula's grappling with the issue of who is in control of the child's writing and marks her progress from a totally supportive role to a role in which she more actively intervenes in the process. At this point, Paula is unclear about what her role should be. There is a mismatch between the teacher's goals for the students -- that is to be in charge of their own writing and the teacher's role-- in what ways can she effectively intervene.

By the end of the year, Paula feels that she has learned how to be more directive with children. She says in the June interview:

> To be more directive with kids. I think that was my biggest problem. . .is that I wanted to give them so much ownership that I was afraid to intercede when it really is necessary at this age of children.

Through being more directive with students and modeling ways in which students can interact with text, she believed she was able to move the students from writing these " boring, horrible, dull, voiceless pieces" to writing more interesting, personal pieces. She found that just listening and asking questions was not enough. Not only did she work to understand their pieces, but she found she wanted to provide suggestions and to give examples from her own experience. It is as if she learned that if students are to have control

over their writing, she must play a more active role and help students develop the tools and experience in expressing themselves.

Paula's conception of the purpose of the conference as one of supporting emotional needs became elaborated and refined through the year. The content of the interactions changed from purely supportive comments or conversations about any topic to more focused dialogue in which she not only supports their efforts, but concentrates on their ideas. In her interactions with students, she becomes more directive and intervenes to a greater degree. Her focus shifts from being only child - centered to a position in which she is concerned about the text as well. A stronger interaction between child and text develops.

Dana. The case of Dana provides another example of a teacher who begins from a role in which she is concerned about supporting the efforts of the students and moves towards a greater concern for text and the child's interaction with the text. Dana views the conference time as an opportunity for her to build close relationships with students. This view reflects her overall definition of teaching as being about building relationships with students. In order to develop these relationships with children, Dana believes in an individualized approach to working with students. Often during the October interview, Dana said she sought to teach students individually and that she wanted to get to know her students through their writing. In response to scenarios about writing, Dana said her response would depend entirely on the individual student and "his history, you know, the history of where he is at."

In response to a question about would she have a student revise a piece, she said:

> Again it is hard to know without knowing the child. For this child, this may be a great piece of work and I , you know, I might just compliment them on this great piece of work. They might not have been able to get anything out before this, or very very little detail and suddenly she comes up with this. So it depends on the history of what she has been doing.

Knowing students' backgrounds makes a difference in the way Dana teaches students. She has different expectations and different goals for students to take these differences into account. For instance, she says:

> I think what they bring with them into the classroom has a lot to do with the ways they approach [writing]. . .[she explains the circumstances of one child] . . . I know his background and the background, you know, makes the big difference to how you relate to the children.

She finds that:

> if you take take them for what they are and you accept what they bring to the classroom with them and you work from that, that is great. . . if you have appropriate goals for them then I don't think any children are hard to teach.

She sees the conference as an opportunity to find out the history of the student and the major place to deal with a variety of

issues including content, motivation, and mechanics with individuals. Although she gave the students the same general topic to write about in October, she tried to meet with individuals and support their ideas during conference time. She encouraged students who spoke a language other than English to write in that language. She helped those who were having trouble getting started.

In December, her dominant goal during conferences shifted to trying to get students to clarify what they were writing and to summarize what they had written. Although she interacts in a somewhat different way with each child, her general approach is to probe what the children have said and to fill in some of the details. In the following excerpt from an extended dialogue with B4 in December, it is possible to see how she focuses on trying to understand the child's story:

Conference with B4

T: Somebody almost shot you? This person in the story? Who is this person in the story?
B4: (inaudible)
T: It's about ducktails? So the ducktails are almost shot and they die and they don't come back anymore?
B4: Heroes.
T: And they are heroes when they are shot? They are heroes when they don't come back anymore?
B4: . . .shoot. . .
T: Oh so they shot them and they almost died? But they are not dead? Are they dead or no?
B4:
T: And do they come back anymore?
B4: Yeah.
T: They do come back again. What happens when they come back?
B4: . . . making believe. . .
T: Oh so they are making believe they got shot and then they are going to come back again. Are you in the story?
B4:
T: Who are you?
B4: I'm so right.

T: Are you the boy who is right? You are ducktail? You are going to make believe that you were shot and then you are going to come back again? What is going to happen then?
B4: . . .change into somebody else? Who do you think you might be then?
B4: (inaudible)
T: Who?
B4: Superhero.

Dana uses a variety of techniques to attempt to understand what the student is saying including asking questions, summarizing, and providing a sequence to the story. She genuinely seems to be trying to understand the piece of writing and the child's feelings about it. The issue of control is interesting in this conversation because it appears that the teacher is in control because she is the one filling in the details and who is talking more. However, it is the boy who opens up each topic and the teacher who mirrors or summarizes what he is saying. She asks him primarily questions about what will happen next. She prompts him, but she does not seem to take over the work in a way that the piece becomes her story instead of the boy's story.

In the December interview, Dana shows a concern for both wanting to make a difference with the student and to accept the child. The conference excerpted above illustrates her attempts to bring the child into what she calls "transition" in which she wants to get the child to expand ideas and to go on to the next step. Her uncertainty about knowing what to do is reflected in this statement:

> What am I supposed to say to this child? You know, what can I say that's going to make a difference? . . .Conferencing. It's not always easy to know what to say to even bring the child into that transition.

Yet, she notes that she wants the information to come from the child. She says:

> The child is the author. And you're just, you have to elicit the information from the child and then, somehow, say something that is going to matter, and that is going to bring them to the next stage of writing.

Although she does not define what making a difference means nor does she define the next stage of writing, Dana does seem to have a view of writing as a developmental process in which the teacher can provide support for the student when the student is ready. In order to provide support for a child, she feels she needs to know them personally and to "keep in mind where they are at" in writing. She indicates that it would make no sense to talk about periods at the end of sentences to one particular child because he is not ready yet. Her orientation towards teaching each individual child comes out repeatedly in her discussions about conferring with students. She says, "I'm not teaching writing as a whole. I'm teaching it to Gerald when I'm sitting with Gerald, I'm teaching it to James when I'm sitting with James. " In referring to the child whom she conferred with in the above excerpt she says:

> What James told me today really made me think. Why did he say that? And I really wanted to know was he dead? Did he feel he had done something bad that he should be dead and he's never coming back? Did that come from something that had happened in school? You know. Is it something that maybe I said to him? Maybe I reprimanded him for saying something bad and was that

> what, or is it coming from home? So, it gives you an insight. Gives you an insight into the kids. It's a very special time of the day [conferring] .

Through conferring Dana has learned to talk to students in a different way:

> You build a relationship with the children, you know , during that time [writing time] and you talk to them in a different way, and you relate to them in a different way, and that carries over into other subjects. . .It just takes you over and you change.

Dana's view of the purposes of conferring as opportunities to get to know and to talk to the children continues throughout the year. Her view becomes more elaborated as she participates in the writing process and continues to confer with students. In June she expresses the idea that her goals for the year have been to "help each child to reach their own potential, whatever that may be" and her role has been to "help them all get as far as they can get, help them to release whatever is inside of them."

Her conferences reflect her emphasis on the individual as well. She uses a variety of strategies including probing for content, suggesting students include periods and capital letters in their work, and summarizing their pieces. Each of the strategies is used somewhat differently in each conference. The focus changes depending on the individual student such that in one conference the focus might be entirely on mechanics, while in another conference the focus is on content with only some mention of mechanics. The issue of who is in control of the conference also depends upon the

overall context of the individual and where they are in the process of writing and revising.

Dana's view of the purposes of the conferences as an opportunity to get to know individuals becomes more elaborated and concrete during the course of the year. It is not Dana's conceptions that change as much as her practice. In the conferences, the content shifts from being about a specific topic to student selected topics and interactions reflecting student interests. Her role shifts from being merely supportive of individuals to understanding and attending to individual needs and issues that are raised within the context of the conference.

## Discussion

Each of the teachers in her own way found a balance between encouraging students to own their pieces and finding a way to intervene to encourage growth in the writing of students. Teachers' movements towards this balance are reflected on three dimensions: conceptions of the purposes of conferences, the content of the conferences, and the student - teacher interactions during the conference. Alison shifts from having a technical orientation in which she focuses on the finished product of the text towards a position in which she considers the child as an individual. Paula and Dana start from a child-centered focus and move towards considering aspects of the text. All three establish a more balanced view of the writing conference in which both text and the individual writer are considered in an interactive manner.

In moving from one end of a kind of teeter-totter to a more central position in which there is a balance between ownership and

intervention, the teachers have learned to incorporate several features of mother -child interactions that can support language learning in schools: assuming the competence of the learner, knowing the learner, sharing an interest in the task at hand, following the learner, and capitalizing on uncertainty (Florio-Ruane, in press). The teachers have learned how to more successfully balance their own intervention with the needs and interests of the student to achieve ownership of the piece by the student. Through their writing conferences, teachers have come to know their students in a more personal and intimate way.

The student has ownership because he/she builds, elaborates upon and comes to understand writing in a deeper way through the interaction with the teacher. The teacher intervenes in a way that supports the child and moves the child towards a more carefully constructed, clarified and communicative piece of writing. It is in this way that the teacher provides a "scaffolding" of instruction for the learner (Bruner, 1975) through the writing conference.

Writing conferences provide opportunities for teachers to concentrate on the specific task at hand while posing many kinds of uncertainty. The writing conference highlights the risk and difficulty of teaching as a human improvement enterprise (Cohen, in press) because of its highly personal nature as well as its potential to alter traditional conversational rights and obligations (Florio-Ruane, in press). The uncertainty of the task for teachers in the writing conference provides the greatest opportunity to transform their roles because this uncertainty is the vehicle for students and teachers to negotiate the meaning of the text. When teachers capitalize on the

uncertainty of the writing conference, there is the opportunity for teachers to change their practices and develop more authentic interactions with students. In order for teachers to risk the uncertainty, certain contextual constraints such as accountability, mandated curriculum, and large class sizes need to be altered. When these constraints are lifted and teachers receive extensive training and support for engaging in writing conferences, the potential exists to alter school norms and reverse conversational rights and obligations to progress towards a more constructivist view of teaching and learning.

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